

# Hopkins South Monterey

## United Methodist Church

Affecting Lives Through Jesus Christ

Scripture & Sermon

April 11, 2021

Pastor Kelsey

### John 20:19-31

19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

21 Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." 22 And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

30 Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31 But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

## Prayer & Sermon

*God of love and new life,*

*Thank you for this time to be together. Thank you for this time with you. Bless this time we have to spend with your Word. Help us to hear what you know we need to hear, and help us to put what we learn about you and ourselves into action. In the name of the Son and Spirit, Amen.*

I came across this story on Facebook this week. It is centered around Franz Kafka, a famous author from the late 1800s to early 1900s. He never married nor had children, but this story has been shared about a special friendship he had with a little girl until the end of his life. One day he was walking through the park in Berlin when he met a girl who was crying because she had lost her favourite doll. She and Kafka searched for the doll unsuccessfully.

Kafka told her to meet him there the next day and they would come back to look for her. The next day, when they had not yet found the doll, Kafka gave the girl a letter "written" by the doll saying "please don't cry. I took a trip to see the world. I will write to you about my adventures."

Thus began a story which continued until the end of Kafka's life. During their meetings, Kafka read the letters of the doll carefully written with adventures and conversations that the girl found adorable.

Finally, Kafka brought back the doll (he bought one) that had returned to Berlin. "It doesn't look like my doll at all," said the girl. Kafka handed her another letter in which the doll wrote: "my travels have changed me." the little girl hugged the new doll and brought the doll with her to her happy home.

A year later Kafka died. Many years later, the now-adult girl found a letter inside the doll. In the tiny letter signed by Kafka it was written: "Everything you love will probably be lost, but in the end, love will return in another way."

What Kafka did for that little girl helped her believe in the love of her doll even when she couldn't see it, the letters helped her believe the doll was still out there even while she couldn't hold it in her arms. Kafka was acting like an Apostle for the doll, sharing her story to keep the belief alive. This is what Jesus was instructing his Disciples to do, sending them forth to be apostles, testifying about Jesus as Lord and God. Though in this story, the doll is actually gone and Kafka is just telling stories, the Apostles and all those who share the Gospel and testify their personal experience with Jesus are sharing true stories.

The scripture we read this morning is often thought about as the Doubting Thomas story, but focusing on Thomas's labelled doubt instead of the rest of the story means that we could miss what Jesus was trying to teach the Disciples. There is a lot more going on in this story!

The story that we read this morning follows one of the classic passages read on Easter Sunday, similar to the one we read last week, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, found it empty, went running to tell the other followers. She found Peter and John and they came running back. They confirmed Jesus was gone and left Mary there alone, when two angels showed up and then Jesus himself. She didn't realize it was Jesus until he called her by name, "Mary." Jesus sent her to go testify to the rest of the Disciples that he was risen. She did just that, telling them, "I have seen the Lord!" That brings us to the start of today's passage, that shares that yet still, 24 hours after hearing the joyous news of the risen Christ, the Disciples are still locked up in their Upper Room. Despite hearing the testimony of Mary that Jesus defeated death, they are more afraid of those that killed Jesus coming after them. The testimony of Mary wasn't enough for those Disciples to transform how they were living. Jesus showed up among them even as they doubted and feared, greeting them with "Peace be with you!" and showing to them the proof, that it was him risen after crucifixion by showing them his wounded hands and side. They were overjoyed!

Jesus then reminded them to hang onto peace and then gave them their marching orders: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And he shared with them how they would take on Jesus's work in the world. He breathed on them and encouraged them to "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." In the Gospel of John, this gift of the Holy Spirit is the Pentecost moment. Jesus shares the Holy Spirit with the Disciples to empower them to take on being leaders of ministry and sharing Jesus's radical mission of bringing forgiveness and grace to all peoples. Jesus gives them this huge gift of the Holy Spirit and this important mission to take out of their Upper Room into the world.

Now, enter Thomas. For whatever reason he wasn't with the Disciples when Jesus showed up, must have been on an errand. But when he comes back, the rest have quite the story to tell. Have you ever been the person who just missed something amazing that you had so hoped to be part of? In my senior year of high school I was President of the Spanish Club. We had a special meeting to have our picture taken for the yearbook. We waited for the photographer to come while doing activities. I took 2 minutes to run to the restroom and came back to find out that the photographer had come, taken the group shot and left in the time I was gone. It wasn't really anyone's fault that they missed me, but man did it sting when I came back and found out that I missed it. It really took the wind out of my sails. I imagine that is a bit like what Thomas was feeling. Thomas had likely heard Mary's tale on Easter evening and he was probably eager to find out if it was true. He had probably been a part of conversations between the Disciples as they figured out what to do with this new information and making plans for their future. And he missed the most pivotal moment. Thomas tells them that he wishes for the same experience they had, getting to see the wounds in Jesus's body.

This is the line that gave Thomas his famous nickname that would follow him for the rest of forever: Doubting Thomas. "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe." Now, something I hadn't really thought about before now, is that this claim is more a doubting of the Disciples than it is of Jesus himself. He does not believe their testimony that they

“have seen the Lord!” They don’t seem to tell him all of what Jesus said to them and they don’t show any evidence of having changed because of this encounter. Thomas finds them still locked away in that Upper Room and they don’t seem any closer to doing anything different because of this encounter. Thomas doubted that their testimony could be true.

He seems to have been right to, as the text continues by telling us that a full week later, the Disciples could still be found locked in that house. At this point, I imagine Jesus may have rolled his eyes a little bit. These Disciples didn’t believe Mary and now they experienced it for themselves and they still aren’t changed and they can’t even give convincing testimony! It would be easy for Jesus to be frustrated with the Disciples by then, or to write them off as a lost cause. But, Jesus is more gracious and forgiving than we humans tend to be. Jesus shows up AGAIN after the week goes by. It starts seeming like it will be the same song and dance. He greets them with “Peace be with you!” Now he turns to Thomas, who he knew had declared what he would need to believe, which was no different than what all the other Disciples got to experience. An with no sass, no frustration, no shaming, no condemnation, Jesus just offers Thomas what he needs to believe. Just as Jesus knew that what Mary needed to believe the man in front of her was Jesus was to call her by name, “Mary,” Jesus knew that Thomas needed to see and touch the spots that were a symbol of his suffering and humanness. Jesus met them where they were at with what they needed to take the next step. Jesus was offering Thomas something quite personal and vulnerable, even his wounds were not off limits if it brought others to believe. Jesus offered, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

I hadn’t realized until it was pointed out in the background research I did, that at this point, there is no indication that Thomas takes him up on that offer. Despite practically every piece of art of this encounter showing Thomas with his fingers literally inside of Jesus, the text gives zero hint that Thomas did stick his fingers in the wounds. Instead, Jesus offers, and Thomas’s response is to proclaim, “My Lord and my God!” There is no mention of hesitation or clarifying or questioning. Thomas hears and sees Jesus offering exactly what he had said he would need to believe, and Thomas has no more doubts that Jesus is risen and claims Jesus as his Lord and God, a distinction that he sees Jesus as the teacher he follows and as divine God.

Jesus’s response to Thomas’s proclamation is to say, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” I have typically read this as Jesus sassing Thomas and the rest of the Disciples who did need to see to believe. But reading this passage more closely convinced me that it may not be a sassy or chiding. Jesus didn’t seem to have much frustration or problem in showing up for the Disciples, even showing up multiple times. It seems strange that now that he has convinced them that Jesus would turn to shaming them. Jesus’s reaction in this scene could have been earnest. Though it seems like Jesus is contrasting those who did see Jesus and those who did not as a way to shame Thomas’s and the rest’s doubts, we can also read this as a continued encouragement supporting his last command to the Disciples. In Jesus’s last visit he gave them the Holy Spirit and sent them out to forgive sins. Now, he is reminding them of the many gifts that they have had

as Disciples to see and be with Jesus and to come to belief that way. He is reminding them of that privilege they have that most others will not be able to have. Jesus had told them through his conversation with Mary Magdalene that he will be ascending to be with his Father, Jesus will not be sticking around to be seen in person for very much longer. So, on this third encounter, Jesus reminds them that they have had the unique experience of seeing him and believing in him through it, and Jesus leaves them with this promise, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus is sending them out in the world to share the gospel and forgive sins with his express affirmation that those who come to believe without seeing Jesus in the flesh will be blessed.

That is some good news! Jesus was giving this encouragement for the Disciples to have the confidence to go out and live out the mission and ministry Christ bestowed on them. BUT this is not just a blessing for those that the Disciples would encounter. This is a blessing for all those who would not see Jesus in the flesh but yet still believe. It is a blessing that continues past the first century and all the way until now as we continue the legacy of believing in Jesus without seeing Him directly in front of us. Jesus's blessing assures us that we need not see Jesus to believe in Him.

This passage of John ends with a brief conclusion that Jesus performed many other signs that are not written down. "But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." These final two verses can seem like an insignificant part, just a transition to the final chapter. But it cements what we are supposed to be taking from this story of the Disciples in the upper room, Thomas, and Jesus showing up. Yes, there is much to focus in on and preach on throughout this passage, from unpacking what the forgiveness stuff means to learning from Thomas's need to see to believe, to the place of doubt in our faith. This passage is rich with tangents and side lessons that can teach us a lot today. But, these final verses tell us what this story as a whole is meant to remind us as the current believers, the current Disciples of Jesus. We have not seen Jesus in the flesh to believe, but carry on the legacy of sharing testimony of Jesus to bear witness to Jesus's work in the world and in ourselves. The author of John reminds us that the signs and experiences of Jesus in the flesh are written down in the form of the Gospel so that we all have a reminder that Jesus was born, lived, taught, led ministry, was killed, rose again, and now is with God. Blessed are those that come to believe from reading the stories of Jesus on earth. As Jesus is now not with us in physical body, the Bible and other forms of testimony, like telling our own stories of Jesus in our lives, are the necessary witness to help make Jesus tangible so they can believe. Today, Jesus shows up through the testimony of believers to transform hearts and the world.

Like many stories throughout the Gospels, this encounter with the risen Christ tells us more of how to do better than the Disciples than to be just like them. As we now live in a time without the option of asking Jesus to pop into our locked rooms to show off his wounds, we have to rely on using testimony and proof of transformation as the evidence of the healing power of Christ. This is a good reminder to listen for the testimony of others when we are feeling low in belief or our doubts are out of balance. For those of

us that have our belief, it is up to us to share our experiences with Jesus to others so they can come to believe in Jesus through the witness of his work in the world, instead of needing to see Him in person. We can share our testimony without words or direct stories also through the way we live out our lives as Easter people. Let us learn from the Disciples and not hear the good news, rejoice in it, and then stay in exactly the same place we were in before. Let us not be paralyzed by fear of the powers that be in the world or the social consequences for living a life transformed by Jesus. In the book of John it took most of the Disciples at least 3 encounters with the risen Jesus to accept their mission from Jesus and go out as Apostles. We can hope to do a bit better than them, but we can also be assured of God's grace as we know that even though it took them that long to get their stuff together and get on board, God used them to do spectacular and very important work to start the Jesus movement and the church. This story of the Disciples in that Upper Room challenges us to think much bigger than just if we have any doubts or not. Hearing of the Disciples' encounter we are encouraged to reflect on ourselves. Here we are a week after Easter, a week after celebrating the resurrection. How have you been changed by the resurrection of Christ? Now that the easter egg hunts are over and our Easter candy has been eaten, do you see any transformation in yourself after spending time in the Holy Week story? OR are you in that upper room? Have you stayed in the familiar and safe and not allowed yourself to live into the new? Do we show or share any evidence that there is a risen Christ? Have we as a community of believers unlocked the doors to our safe spaces, our sanctuary and church to share our experiences of Jesus with others and let Jesus work through us to help others experience Him? What can you search out in your relationship with Jesus to get your version of seeing the wounds, to get evidence of Jesus's presence in our lives?

Jesus knows how intimidating and scary that can be. Not only to allow ourselves to be transformed but to then put ourselves out there to transform the world. There is a reason Jesus began each of these encounters with "Peace be with you!" We will pass the peace of Christ in just a little bit later in our service. We continue this tradition as a way to encourage each other to hold onto the peace shared with us from Christ as we go back out into the world. Let us take hold of that peace, rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit, and live out the transformation possible for us through the resurrection as we live out and share the testimony of our Risen Lord and God so that more can come to believe.

Let us pray.

*Patient Lord, you wait for us to understand. You wait for us to remove the blinders of prejudice, fear, unbelief, confusion. You have offered to us the greatest miracle of all time, the resurrection of Your Son Jesus Christ. We sang and celebrated last Sunday, but a week has passed and we have slid back into our old ways of perceiving your presence and love. Shake us up, Lord! Shake us up and cause us to look with new eyes on our Savior, who came that we might have life, abundantly serving all who are in need. Forgive our stubbornness and our complacency. Reach out to us so that we may reach out with healing love to others, for we pray this in Jesus' Name. AMEN.*